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## Comments, What For? User Participation and Quality of the Debate in Four European Newspapers Political J-blogs

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In recent years, we have witnessed an increase in the spaces for content written by audiences in the news media and the growing integration of such material in areas that had been reserved for news professionals until now. And, without a doubt, political issues have been one of the ones that have generated the most debate on the networks. And, without a doubt, political issues have been one of the issues that have created the most citizen participation. To contribute to this debate, the article summarizes findings of a broader project on the activity of audiences employing qualitative research of the users' comments collected from the political blogs of *Elpais.com*, *Guardian.co.uk*, *Lemonde.fr*, and *Repubblica.it*. As results indicate, the patterns of the audience's participation varied across countries. Still, it coincides in that there are lower levels of dialogue between participants as well as of involvement of the authors-*bloggers* than expected.

**Keywords:** Online media, user participation, politics, weblogs, public sphere, journalism, debate, comment

Journalism is in constant evolution, but the new digital technologies, particularly the Web, have revolutionized the media as it had never occurred before. Even so, beyond technology, the main revolution has been the exploitation of the positive characteristics of the online content, such as the interactivity. Together with the hypertext and multimedia, interactivity has been considered one of the main features is defining the web discourse and, thus, some authors have given it a leading role in the digital media (Barry & Doherty, 2016; Guillory & Sundar, 2014). As is well known, the Internet's communication structures have increased the power that users have over what information is disseminated, also putting new energy into other forms of communication-based on more significant social interaction (Ali & Fahmy, 2013; Fröhlich, Quiring, & Engesser, 2012). The Internet has led the audience to increase its power to decide and participate, thus recovering its ability to act (Holton, Coddington & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013). This collective content creation is directly associated with the phenomenon of the *citizen or participatory journalism* (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Deuze, 2003; Paulussen et al., 2007; Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Jones, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009), a tendency has been in constant evolution since the end of the nineties when the audience started being increasingly fragmented and seeking stimuli and immediate satisfaction (Campbell, 2015; Paulussen and D'heer, 2013; Livingston, 1999; Schultz, 1999).

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Online media users increasingly have a more significant number of resources that enable them to share texts, images and sounds, exchange or redistribute information, and participate, comment, and spread the news. The 21<sup>st</sup> century journalism forms part of a much more complex environment than it did barely ten years ago. On the one hand, different actors negotiate and shape how the internet and related digital technologies are entrenched in the newsroom (Spyridou et al., 2013). At the same time, on the other hand, passive and silent citizens have become potential information producers. These are recent and gradual changes, which have not even affected all the media but are part of a process with different degrees and paths chosen.

Today, there is no doubt that the Internet is guided by news consumption standards that are different from those prevailing in the traditional offline market, which has forced the media to adapt to a context in which citizens have their say. The Internet has given rise to varied formats of journalism like citizen journalism. In this format of journalism, the production, distribution, and consumption of contents have been defined. Other factors like news values, gatekeeping, and participatory culture of information have been the bedrock of such communication (Biswal, 2009). Far from the traditional tools that seemed to emerge at the dawn of online journalism (Schultz, 1999; Deuze, 2001), the online media have focused on new applications that foster varied forms of opening-up and participation (Lewis, Pea, & Rosen, 2010; Braham, 2010). The journalism industry has capitalized on the extensive range of opportunities that have opened up as a result of the possibilities of expression that the web provides to any citizens who want to be informed directly, without any filtering by the media (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). This implementation of participatory spaces has been considered one of the main trends in the evolution of digital journalism (Thurman, 2006; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008).

Users are no longer passive beings who limit themselves to receiving information that others provide, and now they also want to produce their content, which increasingly blurs the limit between the information professionals and the users since the latter assume new facets as communicators and content creators. Thanks to their education level and the latest IT tools, users can acquire fundamental abilities that had only been in the hands of professional journalists until now (Örnebring, 2013; Goh, Heng & Lin, 2013). Their contributions have become an essential part of the production process (Singer, 2014; Leung, 2013). Citizens' direct participation in information production has even replaced some of the traditional and established media as the primary sources of information (Bowman & Willis, 2003).

The advance of the Web 2.0 in recent years has been extraordinary, and it is hardly surprising that the world's primary media strive to join the 2.0 trends and consolidate all types of interactive practices to foster citizen participation (Biswal, 2019; Brake, 2014; Harrison & Barthel, 2009). Therefore, the Web 2.0 applications, with an increasingly more significant presence in the online press, provide citizens the opportunity to express themselves and communicate with one another without requiring advanced technological abilities, and they have transformed how we seek select, access and distribute information (Jenkins, 2006; Castells, 2011).

At present, readers are content editors, and they define how they see the information, and they form communities in this process. They get informed using not only the traditional media but also social media such as the blogs – or even the named micro-blogs created by official public institutions (Song & Bian, 2016). They become relevant in the way that they use the technology to improve or add value to a piece of information (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). People use these tools to filter, assess, and show their attitude

towards the information (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 2000). It is a fact that any person can now carry out the functions that used to be attributed to the information media: 'The arenas of public communication and especially news production still are dominated by the media, but in certain spheres, alternative agenda-setting actors do exist, and they are producing news themselves' (Domingo, Quandt, & Heinonen, 2008).

In the new social media society, each individual is a potential 'journalist,' a unique characteristic that the media try to encourage. The media ask people to send in photos or videos of anything that they have witnessed or to make comments about the published news (Lee, 2012; Thurman, 2008). A myriad of online users accesses the Internet every day to express and share their views and opinions. Mainly, comments posted by users on news websites are one of the most extended means of online participation (Ruiz et al., 2011). There are varied reasons for doing this, which include gaining audience loyalty, increasing traffic, improving the brand's presence, creating a user community, promoting content, achieving more considerable attention and obtaining a source of news and references (Vujnovic et al., 2010; Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007; Reich, 2008; Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa, 2010; Stassen, 2010).

## Literature Review

Although there are many and valuable advantages of including citizens in news production, many questions arise concerning the identity of journalism, the quality of information, and even the identity of the professionals themselves. Despite the lack of enthusiasm to modify long-established work routines within some newsrooms (Klinenberg, 2005; Singer, 2004; Schmitz & De Macedo, 2009), the journalism practices have been reinvented necessarily to respond to a more complex scenario, highlighted by constant updates, an abundance of information, more significant audience present in the communication process, and innovation in formats, genres, and types (Nyre, 2014). In this context where new practices are acquired, journalists have increasingly become the managers of the information and dialogue with the audience, acquiring a more specific *mediator* role (Reich & Godler, 2016). The information has never been this accessible before, and we are witnessing greater democratization of the data (Haas, 2004).

As the readers never stop demanding reliable and quality information, the relationship between the media and its audience must strengthen the traditional democratization value of the mediated communication and foster improvements in the quality of the content offered. According to Habermas (1984 & 1992), the quality can be evaluated from the identification of the logic, the argumentation, and the coherence in the arguments that are being used. Defined in this way, the dialogue has the potential to become a transformative tool for achieving social change, provided that it is defined according to moral, rational, and ethical bases.

The scenario briefly described above has led numerous scholars to emphasize the new dilemmas that will arise due to both the evolution of the communication products and the effects of the growing 'participation' among an increasingly (inter)connected society. Even though some researchers wonder if the trends toward socially converging media environments mean more democracy and public inclusion in the decision-making and communication processes (Quandt & Singer, 2009: 139), there is no doubt that citizens' discussion and participation are an essential condition for democracy. As Habermas (1984 & 1992) points out, a rational argumentation requires maintaining a moral attitude at all times, which must respect the principles of legitimacy, sincerity, truthfulness, and clarity.

This involvement seems to be especially relevant when dealing with political opinions, all the more so taking into account the existence of previous studies that deal with the influence of interpersonal communication to moderate the media's impact on the civic movement and their participation in political life. The interpersonal communication between citizens and their discussion on political issues conditions the messages that they receive from the media and the information that enables citizens to be politically active: the relationship between news consumption and political participation depends on the value of the third variable, such as interpersonal discussion. Thanks to these conversations, citizens give more meaning to the information that they receive from the media (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005).

Blogging is one of the most powerful communication tools in cyberspace to foster actual citizen participation (Tremayne, 2012). Not for nothing is the weblog, a particular form of expression that encourages collaboration (voluntary, asynchronous, and public) among users in communication. This interrelationship between issuer and receivers, i.e., between bloggers and Internet users, is characterized as an open communication process that has established itself as an alternative to the traditional paradigm (Agerdal-Hjermin, 2014) of a hierarchical and one-way media. Since they burst onto the Internet communication scene, weblogs have raised significant challenges to the traditional communication structure represented by the established media (Deuze, 2005), and we have even witnessed the emergence of new dynamics as the Live Blogging. This format provides journalists with a means to manage the competing demands of a range of public, that is, their elite and mass publics (Thurman & Walters, 2013). This means that the significant impact of blogging lies in the fact that they began challenging journalists' monopoly on professional practices (Yagodin, 2014; Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013; Hermida, 2012).

Blogs were the first to reach this new interactivity status towards which the online press has now evolved (Thurman & Newman, 2014). In fact, at present, one of the participation formulas most used among the online press are blogs, which belong to those media, written by in-house journalists or by experts on different subjects (*media blogs*), or readers who have been handed over such spaces (*audience blogs*). In the middle, there can find weblogs that journalists maintain outside their companies (*journalist blogs*) and weblogs produced by the public outside media companies (*citizen blogs*).

At first, the frenzy of losing control of the message, the decline in media sovereignty in favor of readers, and the fear of losing credibility by providing content of questionable quality led to many concerns among publishers. However, in time and view of the audience awakening, the online newspapers began to include blogs in their offering to provide diverse opinions and reports on significant events. This use was understood as an opportunity to cover areas that had been neglected by the liberal media and thus increase the appeal for digital media and publications, which were too similar to the paper version at that time (Lowrey, 2006; Domingo & Heinonen, 2008). Professional newsrooms started 'normalizing' (Singer, 2005) the new genre and embedding it in their production logics.

Many of these online media decided to include theme-based blogs where the journalists specializing in a particular area could deal with the information in a different way to what was usually done, remembering that blogs form part of the medium's information offering, which is conceived as a dialogue to stimulate user participation: a mixed formula of professional and participatory journalism. These j-blogs have an obvious intention to collect, analyze, interpret or comment on current events aimed at attracting a broad audience (Campbell, 2015) and, in this way, perform the very same social function usually associated with institutionalized media (Saridou & Veglis, 2016; Domingo & Heinonen, 2008).

Blogs began offering citizens a more significant role and greater autonomy to develop their communication skills (Deuze, 2006; Matheson, 2004) which, until then, had been limited to participating in chats, video chats, surveys, and forums, commenting, voting and sending things to friends, as well as increasing their visibility in their own Web 2.0 spaces such as Digg, Menéame and Delicious.

The consequences of the increase in the number of blogs, with very diverse formats (video blogs, audio blogs, and photoblogs), subjects, and purposes (Miller & Shepherd, 2004; López & González, 2014), have been enormous. Their presence has changed the habits of users, who follow the blogs that interest them every day, and they have impacted the relations between Internet users themselves and between the users and the online medium that hosts them. The debate about whether weblogs are of any significance from a journalism perspective has changed its tune. What we think is that instead of wondering whether weblogs are of importance to journalism, the question being asked at the moment is how essential weblogs are (Lowrey, 2006).

The online media host a large number of author blogs that show the opinions of their journalist bloggers with a personal and spontaneous style, which enable them to generate columns that are closer to the readers; this involvement was tacit on paper, but it is even much more evident in the case of blogs. Although blogs have lost the shine and novelty that they had a few years ago, they are still a widely used platform among news websites, with several objectives: increase the audience, gain young readers, expand the spectrum of the content offered, enable offline journalists to publish digitally, provide more personal opinion spaces, create small community spaces, or simply foster user participation.

One of the most crucial attributes of weblogs is that they allow users to publish comments right below each post. This turns the blog into a debate arena in which the author initiates a conversation with a piece of information or opinion that the readers can follow up actively. In this way, very often, blogs form a community of users around them who contribute with their comments (Stauffer, 2002). This dialogical nature of weblogs is what makes them an appropriate tool with which to develop new kinds of participatory journalism projects (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008).

Although lately much has been said about weblogs as a phenomenon, and descriptions of the rise of the 'blogosphere' have been abundant, analytical treatises on the relationship between weblogs and journalism have been less frequent (Turner, 2013).

## Research Questions

The study is to provide at least some kind of order in a seemingly entangled discussion on weblogs and journalism, and hence make a new contribution to the ongoing debate on the challenges that the blogosphere poses to professional journalism. The current study is aimed at detailing whether the leading European newspapers' blogs have paved the way for user participation, and asking if this tool is being used to respond to these media's desire to connect with the community, breaking the one-way barrier of the journalistic messages and converting the recipients in issuers and vice versa.

The current research aims to approach these questions from the perspective of the users' participation in the media blogosphere context, paying particular attention to the opportunities for dialogue between readers and between these and the author.

## Methodology

In the last years, authors have focused on analyzing participatory journalism from different perspectives. While some studies consider professional journalists' attitudes towards the proliferation of participatory spaces (Chung, 2007; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010), others wonder about the reasons why the audience wants to participate, or the consequences of audience's participation for journalism, in terms of quality, gatekeeping and more social dialogue. More specifically, gradually, some authors are starting to research the quality of the public debates taken from the comments made to the news (Ruiz et al., 2010), an aspect that seems to be less developed than the others. Because of this, this article pays attention to the comments made by readers to the political blogs, to identify the language used, the existence of dialogue, the participants' recognition, the respectful treatment between them and the presence of arguments and resources that help to enrich the debate, such as the links used in the comments to connect them to added data.

As explained before, blogs are one of the main spaces in the online media for the exploitation of interactivity, overall for a fluent dialogue not only between the blog author (journalist or expert) and the readers but also between the latter. The particular characteristics of the blog offer an excellent opportunity for the debate, which seems to be an especially exciting option when talking about political issues. What is more, the political j-blogs are some of the ones that generate most comments from citizens and, therefore, have more significant participation (Singer, 2005).

On account of this premise, the central research hypothesis was that European quality newspapers tend to take advantage of political blogs written by journalists and experts for promoting users' participation and generating internal dialogue, which could be comparable to the type of interactional dynamics that create social media platforms nowadays.

To clarify this hypothesis and contributing to the knowledge of political j-blogs, a research was conducted to determine the characteristics of their comments and the level of participatory interactivity promoted through these, in terms of dialogue between the author and the readers and among the latter.

According to the research questions, sixteen media blogs (Table 1) were chosen in 2014 from four of the leading European newspapers in their country of creation, which are *Elpaís.com* (Spain), *Guardian.co.uk* (United Kingdom), *Repubblica.it* (Italy) and *Lemonde.fr* (France). The four most active blogs have been selected from each medium taking into account the number of comments. We must state that the number of political blogs founded on *Guardian.co.uk* fully exceed those found on *Repubblica.it*, *Lemonde.fr*, and *Elpais.com*. On the latter three, we identified four, eight and twelve blogs, respectively, while on *Guardian.co.uk* there are more than fifteen political bloggers who publish with some form of regularity half of the j-bloggers write in irregular periods: one week they publish every day and the next they only post once a week. In general, they all write at least four posts a month. This shows the projections for the characteristics and commitments of a society that decides about the political issues and debates in its country of residence.

Table 1. Title and URL of the sample blogs

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Guardian.co.uk</b>             |   |
| Politics live with Andrew Sparrow | <a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/series/politics-live-with-andrew-sparrow">http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/series/politics-live-with-andrew-sparrow</a> |
| Ben Quinn's blog                  | <a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/benquinn">http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/benquinn</a>   |
| Nicholas Watt's blog              | <a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/nicholaswatt">http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/nicholaswatt</a>   |
| Graeme Wearden's blog             | <a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/graemewearden">http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/graemewearden</a>   |
| <b>Elpaís.com</b>                 |   |
| El Patio del Congreso             | <a href="http://blogs.Elpaís.com/el">http://blogs.Elpaís.com/el</a>   |
| Entre moquetas                    | <a href="http://blogs.Elpaís.com/entre">http://blogs.Elpaís.com/entre</a>   |
| La voz de Iñaki                   | <a href="http://blogs.Elpaís.com/la">blogs.Elpaís.com/la</a>  |
| El ojo izquierdo                  | <a href="http://blogs.Elpaís.com/ojo">blogs.Elpaís.com/ojo</a>  |
| <b>Repubblica.it</b>              |   |
| Politica Pop                      | <a href="http://bracconi.blogautore.Repubblica.it">http://bracconi.blogautore.Repubblica.it</a>   |
| Ritagli                           | <a href="http://vecchio.blogautore.Repubblica.it">http://vecchio.blogautore.Repubblica.it</a>   |
| Agli Atti                         | <a href="http://rivara.blogautore.Repubblica.it/">http://rivara.blogautore.Repubblica.it/</a>   |
| Cambi di Stagione                 | <a href="http://casadio.blogautore.Repubblica.it/">http://casadio.blogautore.Repubblica.it/</a>   |
| <b>Lemonde.fr</b>                 |   |
| En quête d'emploi                 | <a href="http://emploi.blog.Lemonde.fr/">http://emploi.blog.Lemonde.fr/</a>   |
| Rouges et verts                   | <a href="http://gauche.blog.Lemonde.fr/">http://gauche.blog.Lemonde.fr/</a>   |
| Droite(s) extrême(s)              | <a href="http://droites-extremes.blog.Lemonde.fr/">http://droites-extremes.blog.Lemonde.fr/</a>   |
| En quête d'emploi                 | <a href="http://emploi.blog.Lemonde.fr/">http://emploi.blog.Lemonde.fr/</a>   |

Empirical research was conducted by using content analysis qualitative technique, which has been one of the preferred methods for audience research in journalism (Patriarche et al., 2013). The sample was designed considering the comments made by the audience in the last ten posts of the selected blogs (Table 1). For that, there were chosen the posts with the highest number of users' comments. We also considered the updates of the blogs and ruled out those that had not been updated in the previous two months. In total, 160 posts were analyzed.

In methodological terms, the analysis considered that the total comments that a post generates make up a conversation. It also took into account if the participants recognized each other as such and treat each other with respect, accepting other people's arguments. This assumption for the analysis was based on the theoretical framework of Jürgen Habermas' discourse ethics since it considers that dialogue is an ethical and rational procedure for social construction.

According to the above-defined research questions, the selected blogs were examined to establish the interactive tools used to disseminate and share the published information, together with the possibility of making comments through any social media and their diversity. The characteristics of the comments were determined according to three indicators:

- (i) Logic and coherence, i.e., if the participants (blog's author and readers) focus on the subject of the debate and if they show some intention of discussing it.
- (ii) Weight of the argumentation, i.e., if the participants (blog's author and readers) use external sources to support their arguments (providing links to other websites, such as newspapers, blogs, administrations, etc.).



- (iii) Appropriateness of language used and respectfulness, i.e., if the participants (blog's author and readers) recognize and respect the others' conversation, here we must establish if they discredit or insult the post's author, its protagonists (people, institutions, etc.) or other users.
- (iv) Attitude to dialogue, i.e., if the participants (blog's author and readers) show themselves implicated and committed for providing feedback.

### Results

Apart from having a space in which to participate by making comments, the blogs that we selected also include several interactive tools where users can tweet the posts, recommend and share them on the social media, as well as other intercommunication spaces between users, as can be seen in Table 2. The four blogs we examined have quite regular updates, although there are some differences. Most of them are updated three or four times a week (31.3%) and some even every day (25%).

Table 2. Interactive tools in blogs

|                         | <i>Elpaís.com</i> | <i>Guardian.co.uk</i> | <i>Lemonde.fr</i> | <i>Repubblica.it</i> |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Facebook</i>         | ✓                 | ✓                     | ✓                 | ✓                    |
| <i>Twitter</i>          | ✓                 | ✓                     | ✓                 | ✓                    |
| <i>Stumble Upon</i>     |                   | ✓                     |                   |                      |
| <i>Tumblr</i>           |                   | ✓                     | ✓                 |                      |
| <i>Linkedin</i>         |                   | ✓                     |                   |                      |
| <i>Del.icio.us</i>      |                   | ✓                     | ✓                 |                      |
| <i>Reddit</i>           |                   | ✓                     |                   |                      |
| <i>Digg</i>             |                   | ✓                     |                   |                      |
| <i>Google Bookmarks</i> |                   | ✓                     |                   |                      |
| <i>Livejournal</i>      |                   | ✓                     |                   |                      |
| <i>Google +1</i>        |                   | ✓                     |                   | ✓                    |
| <i>In Share</i>         |                   | ✓                     |                   |                      |
| <i>Tuenti</i>           | ✓                 |                       |                   |                      |
| <i>Meneame</i>          | ✓                 |                       |                   |                      |
| <i>Eskup</i>            | ✓                 |                       |                   |                      |
| <i>Bitácoras</i>        | ✓                 |                       |                   |                      |
| <i>iGoogle</i>          | ✓                 |                       |                   |                      |
| <i>Yahoo</i>            | ✓                 |                       |                   |                      |
| <i>MyLive</i>           | ✓                 |                       |                   |                      |
| <i>Email</i>            |                   | ✓                     |                   | ✓                    |

During the data collection period, we coded 15,841 comments corresponding to 160 posts from the 16 blogs chosen (4 blogs analyzed in each online newspaper of the sample and 10 posts in each blog, i.e., an average of nearly 100 comments per blog). The sixteen political blogs were chosen according to their representativeness in terms of audience participation.

Sometimes a blog post barely has any comments, while other times the same blog may generate greater interest on the next day and significantly increase the number of comments received. It is widely accepted that the vast majority of the members in online communities are *lurkers* (Nonnecke & Preece, 2005; Li et al., 2008), that is, people who read and rarely participate but whose existence is anyhow advisable for the health of the community (Riding, Gefen, & Arinze, 2006).

This circumstance is evident, especially in *Elpais.com* and *Guardian.co.uk*. For example, in Fernando Garea's 'El patio del Congreso' blog in *Elpais.com*, one post had only 14 user comments while the next post had 135. In Ben Quinn's blog in *Guardian.co.uk*, one post had 22 comments, and the one with the largest amount had 167. The post that generated the most significant interest was published by *Guardian.co.uk* on 5 March as a result of the Ecofin meeting and the controversy arising from the UK's position represented by George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. This post generated 866 comments. The blogs of *Guardian.co.uk* make the most considerable amount of comments (6428), followed by *Lemonde.fr* (3494), *Repubblica.it* (3437), and *Elpais.com* (2482). Users prefer to be anonymous by using nicknames (88.7%) and, to a lesser extent, their forename and surname (11.3%) when they participate.

The users of the political blogs analyzed show that they prefer to participate and debate with other users. In this sense, it is usual to find users that participate more than once, intending to respond to other users' arguments. The percentage of users who return to the debate is 80% in *Repubblica.it*, 62.5% in *Guardian.co.uk*, 72.5% in *Lemonde.fr*, and 90% in *Elpais.com*. In this respect, we must also state that some people who use their forename and surname or their nickname participate not only in the debate of the same blog, but they are normally regular participants in other blogs of the same online press. For example, in the blogs of *Elpais.com*, a user identified as 'Witness' makes comments in practically all the political blogs.

Regarding the authors' involvement, the majority evidence low participation in the debate or dialogue that they want to establish with their audience. Political bloggers are not very active, except for the blogs chosen of *Repubblica.it*, especially in the 'Politica Pop' blog. Of the 80 posts analyzed in *Elpais.com* and *Lemonde.fr*, the author participated only once each time. In *Elpais.com*, he did so because he was trying to clarify his position concerning a question made by another user.

Rafael, I am sorry that this was understood as a discredit since this was not my intention. It is a comparison of a person who gets on board something that he does not control, and it ends up devouring him because it goes far beyond him. The independent lion awakens, he gets on board, and then he does not have the ability to manage it. Thank you. (posted by Fernando Garea on 25/11/2012).

In *Lemonde.fr*, the author participated in confirming a datum (exceptional) that the user stated because it was not included in the post.

They occur naturally, but the figures for France, including the overseas departments, are not published (except for the A and ABC categories and, once again, without the long series). (posted by Jean-Baptiste Chastand on 26/02/2013)

It is interesting to see a large percentage of comments, which show an apparent predisposition to dealing with issues and debates that are directly related to the post's subject. To a large extent, this helps to establish logic and coherence in the conversation between the post's participants. In this sense, the users who follow and participate in these blogs show their interest in political issues and, in general, regarding both the blog author and the other participants. Such is the case that 92% of the total comments analyzed are related to the debate's subject.

The large percentage focusing on political posts is evident even more so in the case of *Repubblica.it*. Not for nothing were these participations, at the time of our analysis, to be influenced by the results of the general elections in February 2013 and the ensuing crisis

in Italy as a result of the difficulties in forming a government. The comments continually referred to the Italian political issues dealt with in the posts, especially regarding the possible presidential candidates (Berlusconi, Giorgio Napolitano, Bersani, etc.).

Although there is a minority, certain users tend to drift away from the post's subjects, for example, when they get involved in pointless discussions or try to use this discussion space to promote specific products or services. These 'independent' comments are especially evident in the case of *Elpaís.com*, as can be seen in the following example.

*Can you imagine LOSING over 20 KG eating what YOU LIKE MOST??*

*A SURPRISING VIDEO shows you how to achieve this WITHOUT DEPRIVING YOURSELF OF YOUR FAVOURITE FOOD. UNMISSABLE!!*

*You can see the VIDEO HERE: <http://goo.gl/FCa41>*

*Posted by: jijj COMO BAJAR 15KG YA!!!! (HOW TO LOSE 15 KG RIGHT NOW!!!!)*

*(posted on the El Patio del Congreso blog on 01/04/2013)*

Generally speaking, users' comments have been regarded as a nonsensical jumble of words. Some authors have reflected on them in terms of bullshit or irresponsible (Ruiz et al., 2010). Thus, an element that helps to ascertain the degree of logic and coherence is whether the participants intend to argue about the debate's subject based on other users' answers. There are diverse reasons for these participations: to clarify points of view that were stated, to polarize the conversations, to criticize what others have said, to foster greater dynamism in the dialogue, etc. In this respect, the users of *Guardian.co.uk*'s political blogs are those most prone to establishing conversations between them. The analysis results also provide us with information about users' respect for other users and the blog author. In this sense, we must highlight that there are few direct insults or discredits, and they are generally accompanied by exclamation marks and capital letters. In this way, our analysis of the language that is used shows that there is a much more significant percentage of respectful comments (98.6%) than disrespectful ones (1.4%).

In many cases, those comments enter the realm of derogatory language and insult. Trolls or flame warriors —participants who sabotage the online discussion— become, therefore, recognizable individuals, inherent to the platform (Himelboim et al., 2009). The media industry has debated the need for stricter control of user participation or even its cancellation. To offer an example of offensive attitudes and disrespectful language used by some users, we will provide some examples from the blogs of *Elpaís.com* and *Guardian.co.uk*. In the specific case of *Guardian.co.uk*, we noticed that the newspaper had rigorously moderated the comments since, in the nearly 40 posts that we analyzed, some comments had been removed. The following had been inserted: 'This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our community standards. Replies may also be deleted. For more detail, see our FAQs'. For example, in the posts that we analyzed on issues dealing with the Pope and the Princess of Wales, we identified four and five comments, respectively, per post that had been deleted. Perhaps this is why we have only identified 0.3% of aggressive comments because the others were removed.

Colirio, apart from being a cretin, you're also a liar and a cynic. Wait, I think that I already told you this before (posted on the El ojo izquierdo blog on 9/04/2013)

That Osborne is a nasty, bitter, twisted piece of work (posted on the blog Politics Live with Andrew Sparrow on 28/03/2013)

People as stupid as you [...] fuck me (posted on Graeme Wearden's blog on 26/02/2013)

Reid, a fucking pure Tory (posted on the blog Politics Live with Andrew Sparrow on 14/04/2013)

All very bitchy and gossipy do something useful [referring to the rest of the users]  
(posted on Ben Quinn's blog on 26/02/2013)

She's famous for having an arse that high jacked her sister's frivolous wedding [...]  
she's an idiot (posted on Ben Quinn's blog on 26/02/2013)

Troika arseholes (posted on Graeme Wearden's blog on 04/03/2013)

In any case, the insults and discredits barely represent the total of the comments analyzed since, in general, the participants are sensible and respect the others in their comments.

Another critical element in the comments that we studied was the use of links by some users to illustrate, expand, or reaffirm their ideas and, to a lesser extent, criticize or discredit specific sources. Such uses, which are somewhat exceptional, refer to the use of sources that supplement, nuance, or enrich the viewpoints or positions in the discussion. These links may refer to the users' blogs, YouTube videos, information websites, government documents, wikis, or Facebook pages. Others also quote relevant authors and journalists from the medium itself.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Blogs are the most direct predecessor of social media and were given a specific paradigmatic nature at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the quintessence of the Net's presumed '*democratizing* impact.' Blogs have become a dialogue forum for users (Zuckerman, 2009), an invitation to influence the medium's opinion and perhaps that of other users, which is why their usage represents a thought-provoking approach to abandoning the inherited one-way opinion transmission structure. The relevance of a post is mostly external to the weblog, defined by the comments and attention it draws from the communities of bloggers.

As aforementioned, there is abundant literature on the blogging phenomena, even if the specific analysis on the usefulness of media blogs are more scarce, especially in regards to the European quality press and its contribution to the ongoing debates on the value of online media and the participatory spaces for promoting public dialogue and democratization, very notably in regards the main political issues affecting citizens (Hollingsworth, 2013; Tai & Zhang, 2013). This research discusses how political j-blogs are very appropriate non-constrained spaces to encourage ordinary people's participation since the political comments are often embedded within mainstream media where the participation gets limited to the experts on the field.

The results, as mentioned above, can be used to update our knowledge about how the online press uses interactivity based on how one of the most popular current mechanisms works to channel online audience participation: comments to blogs. In addition to detecting the trends about the level of involvement among journalists and the public in a country's political issues, these results are aimed at providing more knowledge about the characteristics of the 2.0 dialogue.

The blogs that we examined stand out because of the level of involvement of both their authors and the users. The recent update these personal publication spaces preferably every day or every week, while a large number of users follow or are loyal to the authors and show an interest in political issues. Many users (citizens) follow two or more political blogs within the same medium and are respectful, logical, and coherent since they focus their comments mainly on the subject in question.

The participation of users responding to the blog author or other users is slightly lower since most of them limit themselves to providing their opinion. In this sense,

participatory spaces such as comments are not always synonymous with a conversation. When there is a conversation, this tends to be because most of the viewpoints differ from some of the users, over which some pressure is exerted, which also leads to a somewhat heated dialogue but the detriment of diversity, despite the freedom of opinion available by definition in the space devoted to comments.

Most of the participations are fragmented since the numbers of users who make a single comment prevail and, therefore, they are not interested in the conversation. We must also highlight that users prefer to remain anonymous. However, this may not be entirely appropriate since they may support anti-democratic, racist, and xenophobic attitudes or go against human rights, even though we have noticed that most of the comments remain, apart from some exceptions, within the limits of respect and a correct language. When a comment exceeds such limits, we noticed that the newspaper had removed it, following its rules of use or legal warnings. The results show that the dialogue is respectful, which favors a democratic involvement, since there are very few insults and discredits aimed at institutions and persons of any type, including other readers.

As a result of the preceding, we conclude that the comments for the 2.0 dialogue between users themselves and between the press and the users are useful. However, we still detect the need to foster mechanisms that will put new energy into this conversation or debate in the traditional and benchmark media. This could be done by a moderator. We also detect, apart from some exceptions, the need for the authors to have greater participation or presence when responding to users, which contrasts with the spirit of a blog, a space defined for exchanges between the author and the users. As a result of all of this, we deduce that, although blogs have been fully assimilated by the online press, they are still not used as they should be since they should be aimed at fostering dialogue and democratic debate, especially in subjects related to political life, beyond simply being a space which highlights the personality of individual firms or is used to gain user loyalty. This circumstance helps to diminish the overestimated interactivity, a potentiality broadly referred and used in regards to the blog format, which seems to be at least noteworthy in the era of dialogue across online social media.

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